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Funding Education Technology Research: Tips For Writing Research Grant Proposals

| By Shelley Kinash |

Sometimes, money is required to investigate the questions educators would like answered about education technology. Funding may also be required to achieve opportune impact. At times, financial resources are required for both data collection and dissemination. For example, educators might wonder whether virtual reality derives equivalent educational impact for children and adults. They may require travel funding to observe and talk to learners in multiple contexts. They might discover that adults require personal hands-on evidence of the possibilities of virtual reality and, therefore, require funding to put on master classes.

The solution is to apply for research and grant funding. However, research grant funding is highly competitive. The success rates of applications for Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching Innovation and Development Grants, for example, range from nine to 15 percent. This article provides tips for writing proposals to increase the likelihood that grant proposals for education technology research are successful.

Three tips are listed and described for each of before, during and after the grant proposal. The tips regarding before the proposal concern the thinking and preparation that need to take place prior to writing the actual proposal document. The next three tips concern success strategies to enact during proposal writing. The final three tips concern what happens when the first two sets of strategies have proven successful and the grant has been secured. These strategies are when the work truly begins. Carefully conducting the research will assure optimal impact.

The strategies presented here are not an exhaustive list. They are necessary, but not fully sufficient. Further experience and research about research, including through conversations with other successful grant recipients, will yield additional strategies.

Before

1 Map the idea to the funding opportunity.

Educators may be reading this article because they have an idea for education technology research they would like to conduct and they need money for the project activities. Sometimes, however, grant opportunities and research ideas turn out to be round holes and square pegs. The first question to ask is whether the idea and the grant opportunity fit together. They are seldom an exact fit. Usually, the researcher is required to shift and modify an idea somewhat until it works with the funder's expectations. Being stubborn about the particularities of the original concept will likely mean that the grant proposal is rejected. However, it is important that the researcher does not compromise to the extent that the proposed research does not have the original intended aims nor achieve the desired impact. In this case, the resulting proposal will likely ring as insincere and not be funded in any case. It will also be challenging to sustain the energy for the research if, for example, the researcher wanted to research blended learning and he was forced to research pure online learning. Clearly identify what is non-negotiable and what can reasonably be adapted.

2 Hunt and gather what has already been done.

This is a vital step in the research process that cannot be missed. Many researchers have thought that their idea was novel and groundbreaking only to discover (sometimes through feedback from an assessor panel) that the question has already been pursued and the results published. Researchers have an obligation to build upon what

has already been established. It is a waste of time to reinvent the wheel, but there is always work that can be done on improving the metaphoric treads. For example, it is well-established that there is no significant difference between the grades of students who attend live lectures versus watching online recorded lectures. However, there is research work to be done on how to equalise the impact of online (versus face-to-face) interactive classes such as tutorials and seminars. Literature reviews that assemble the results of previous empirical work on the chosen research topic make valid contributions to heightening understanding. Literature review also provides evidence to the assessor panel that the applicant has read, thought about, applied and thereby values the research projects they have previously funded. It is likely that the reviewed studies will clearly articulate further questions and gaps, thus creating a clear pathway for the research.

3 Clearly articulate questions, aims, intended outcomes and likely impact.

The questions are what the researcher wonders about or what they want to know. The questions should be guided by what has already been established in the research area or domain. They should also be clearly articulated such that they can be answered by research.

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Aims are what the researcher intends to achieve through their research. Are they seeking to contribute new knowledge, or to apply what has previously been established in a different context, or is the goal to educate others as to implementation? Intended outcomes are deliverables or tangible results from

the research. For example, a good practice guide, a journal paper, two conference publications and five case studies are a sample list of research outcomes from a large-scale research project. Impact is what the researcher can reasonably expect to transpire from his research project. Think about who will be impacted (for example, their students, students at other schools/universities, teachers at their and other schools/universities) and over what timeframes (for example, upon project completion, six months after, one year after). Keep in mind that in most cases, significant impact occurs well after the funding period has concluded and the final research report has been submitted. Propose how the project team will disseminate the findings and sustain impact. Assessor panels look for clearly articulated questions, aims, intended outcomes and forecasted impact when short-listing proposals.

During

1 Highlight key themes in the call and mirror them in the proposal.

Carefully read the call for proposals multiple times, including with a highlighter in hand. Highlight key terms that are used multiple times in the call. What are the key themes, explicit and implicit beliefs, assumptions and interpretations? Ensure that identified headings are all used word for word and in the order presented. Abide by

the word limits for each section. Use the highlighted key words in the body of the proposal.

2 Design achievable project activities with a realistic matched budget.

Remember that the proposal also

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serves as a contract with the funder. If the proposal is funded, the researcher will need to deliver on what has been proposed. The researcher should ensure that the project activities are doable within the timeframe and that the proposed budget is sufficient to address their needs. It is suggested that actual costs (such as researching flight and accommodation costs) are entered into a spreadsheet and then aggregated, providing the totals and budget rationale to the requested detail levels. There are particular considerations to watch for when conducting education technology research. For example, most funding bodies do not allow the purchase of hardware or software. Produced software and applications often need to be open-source and freely available, rather than commercial for-profit.

3 Proofread and edit multiple times and have the proposal peer reviewed.

It is highly recommended that the proposal be read by multiple people, numerous times, and be produced over as long a time period as possible. Read with a purpose. Review numerous times for grammar and spelling. Ensure that the in-text and end-text references align and that the designated referencing style has been perfectly applied. Critical friends who have had success with the particular funding body make excellent peer reviewers. They can read for resonance with the spirit of the call and context

of the funder. It is also useful to have a person from outside the discipline and beyond the immediate context read the proposal. Can a layman readily understand what has been written and does the proposal seem compelling to this reader?

After

1 Track and report the outcomes and impact.

It is important to continue to track and write reports about the outcomes and impact even after the funding term has ended and the final report is submitted. Turn analytics on for websites and other social media. Keep an electronic file of feedback and administer formal evaluation surveys when conducting workshops based on the research. Such data will serve as excellent evidence of the overall impact when applying for subsequent research grants.


2 Build relationships, networks and collegiality.

Find ways to represent the research, key findings and implications to others in ways that are approachable and compelling. Have conversations with others about the research and recognise alignment with their research. Continue to follow the research about the specific topic and track the overall impact. New colleagues may develop into future research partners. Even if a researcher does not plan to conduct further research, developing networks and disseminating findings will nurture impact.

3 Identify questions for further research.

Many researchers tend towards a disease called scope creep. They become so enthusiastic about their project activities that they can expand out of control. They start to include more research participants than they intended and from wider contexts. Sometimes research projects grow to the point that they are untenable and cannot be completed within the allocated time. An antidote to scope creep is for a researcher to post the proposed aims and outcomes on their desktop and read them regularly. Whenever the researcher is tempted to exceed them, articulate a question for further research. Why is it that they want to interview more people or in different contexts than proposed? What is it that they want to know? Writing down and sharing these questions will help a researcher shape further research that they may choose to undertake and/or guide the scope of other's proposals.

Conclusion

Nine tips have now been assembled in the educator's research grant-writing tool belt, including tips and suggestions to apply before, during and after writing a proposal for a competitive grant to research education technology. The funding application advice boils down to three Ps of proposals – preparation, persistence and perseverance. A little perspective (particularly humour) never hurts either. 



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